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ABSTRACT

Among the defining features of the whole language philosophy are: an emphasis on reading comprehension and extracting meaning from text; reading and writing across the curriculum; and the use of phonics instruction, subordinate to other methods (cues) of extracting meaning from text. Controversy between professional educators involved in scientific research and those with daily classroom contact involves the question of whether written language acquisition in children is a natural process encouraged through exposure to authentic activities and relevant, meaningful reading material or whether direct skills instruction in decoding the written word is necessary to learn to read and write. The core goals of the whole language movement are essential to the progress of the educational system and to the success of its students. However, the role of direct, decoding skills instruction in education must be allowed to resurface from its current subordinate position to being one of several key elements in teaching children to read. (CR)

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A PRESERVICE PERSPECTIVE ON WHOLE LANGUAGE

by
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A PRESERVICE PERSPECTIVE ON WHOLE LANGUAGE

As a graduate student recently enrolled in a teaching credential program, I am determined to become a responsible, effective educator - a facilitator of information who inspires creativity, wonder, and exploration throughout all educational domains and in all students. Unrealistic expectations? Perhaps so, but still worthy aspirations none the less. As I prepare to enter this challenging and rewarding profession, I find myself confronting what appears to be one of the most important, yet divisive and disconcerting issues in education today: the role of **Whole Language** in the classroom. Required reading for theory courses from textbooks assigned to prepare us for our future role, are contradicted in newspapers and periodicals almost weekly regarding this controversial issue. A current California State Department of Education Task Force Report (also required text) endorsing, since 1992, the reduction of time spent on skill based activities such as phonics and spelling, will be outdated next year because of recent findings by a panel created by state schools Superintendent Delanie Eastin reversing this decision. As a fledgling credential candidate desperately seeking definitive answers and altruistic guidance from an established, time-honored profession, I found myself frustrated and floundering amid the hyperbole and diatribe surrounding Whole Language. How could I endorse such a controversial, seemingly nebulous ideology that has created polarity among journalists, parents, politicians, and professional educators, yet continues to be embraced by the majority of teachers in authentic classroom settings? I discovered in time that the answer to my question would be found by furthering my knowledge of the subject at hand and the many issues surrounding it. Only through understanding the ideology behind Whole Language could I make a responsible decision to endorse and implement, or criticize and reject.

The first task, **defining** Whole Language, turned out to be a daunting one! Personal interviews with educators usually delivered a different definition from each. Printed material in the form of periodicals and books were equally as diverse, depending on the author's perspective. However, in time, several consistent points began to emerge until, finally, a more discernible definition appeared within my reach. Whole language, often mistaken for a method of instruction, is more accurately a **philosophy**

towards the teaching of language arts. Defining features include: an emphasis placed on reading comprehension/extracting meaning from text; the use of relevant (often classic) literature in a variety of forms across the curriculum supported by authentic, related activities often done in cooperative / collaborative student groups; providing learning experiences that inspire motivation, enthusiasm, and intrigue; strong emphasis on the writing process,again, across the curriculum, and opportunities for plenty of relevant, reflective, unhindered writing; teacher empowerment; the ability to read and write is a natural process that occurs within children, often compared to learning to speak; the use of phonics instruction is subordinate to other methods (cues) of extracting meaning from text. If I have left out any important elements from this rather lengthy and involved description of the philosophy of Whole Language, as suspect I may have, I hope advocates will forgive me and realize my intent is not to misrepresent their cause. Again, what I have tried to do is make this philosophy seem less of a mystery and certainly more understandable.

Through my research I have discovered that when the concept of Whole Language was initially introduced in the United States, it lacked clarity and meaning for many practicing teachers who mistakenly viewed it as a method of teaching, rather than a philosophy. As a result of some ineffective initial presentations which left many in the profession with a vague sense of what was required in order to make this transition work, mistakes were made in the way teachers interpreted and implemented Whole Language into their classrooms. Many teachers were left confused and frustrated by this progressive approach to teaching and learning. Proponents maintain that improperly prepared teachers in the field who lack ***understanding*** and ***commitment*** are to blame for what is often viewed as "whole language failure" in the classroom. However, it should also be noted that not all teachers who struggled with this progressive ideology abandoned it, or were content with something that vaguely resembled it. Many in the profession were inspired by the basic, core philosophy and chose the never ending process of evolving as whole language teachers through ***continued inquiry*** and personal reflection. To assume that questions or concerns did not ***or*** do not arise for them regarding this philosophy is to ignore the basic definition of evolution. These are the teachers who continue to carry the torch hoping to enlighten others along the way.

As with all controversial issues (and this one is no exception!), there are zealots who represent both sides of the issue and the extreme. These fanatics, if you will, appear most visible through the media, and more often than not, misrepresent the opposing side with quotes taken out of context and numerous vituperations succeeding at further polarizing and politicizing the issue at hand. They would have you believe that "common ground" does not exist in either camp and that any hint at civil agreement would be "disloyal to the cause." Too much is at stake to allow such extreme views to govern educational policy.

There are reasonable people with philosophical differences involved in this controversy surrounding education who concede to several common points. Everyone involved in educating young people agree that the ultimate goal of reading is constructing meaning from the written text. Making the process of learning to read exciting and relevant for the student, should be the goal of every educator. Integrating the reading and writing processes in other areas of the curriculum is hardly a point of contention. Treating teachers with dignity and respect, granting them the authority and the confidence to make decisions are not unrealistic requests. Just what ***is*** it, then, about the whole language philosophy that has created such an emotional controversy?

The cause of contention seems to focus around ***written language acquisition*** in children and whether or not it is a ***natural process*** encouraged through exposure to authentic activities and relevant, meaningful reading material, or whether ***direct skills instruction*** in decoding the written word is necessary in order to learn to read and write. Among professional educators there seems to be a stand off between those involved in scientific research, and those professionals (teachers) with daily classroom contact. The whole language advocate is quick to point out that direct skills instruction (phonics) is taught in classrooms, but phonics is not the most important element in learning to read and write. Other methods of "cueing" the reader have greater value according to those who embrace a whole language philosophy.

In order to make their point that whole language has failed a generation of students, researchers in the field of education are quick to provide statistical data and poor test results. The issue of standardized tests verses authentic testing is, in itself, a whole other debate! One can argue that the mandated standardized tests are not designed around the whole language curriculum, and therefore the results are not accurate. However, this past

spring, California administered its first statewide tests (CLAS) designed specifically around this progressive movement in education. The results of this test were less than favorable, prompting an outcry from the public to return phonics instruction to California classrooms. Not taken into consideration when examining the California test results: the number of immigrant children, (second language learners) taking the test, the disadvantage of large classroom sizes (the largest in the nation), and the number of teachers unprepared to properly teach and commit to a true, whole language philosophy. Classroom teachers who ***do*** embrace this philosophy stand firm in their belief that the only accurate assessment is one performed under authentic conditions and context.

I firmly believe, that by categorically denouncing ***all*** research in the area of written language acquisition, we do a grave injustice to children. Granted, some of this research may be done with another agenda in mind - usually a political one - and the slanted results deserve to be questioned! But to impugn all scientific research in this area, is to stubbornly hide our heads in the sand! Equally as devastating, would be to take the results of this research and reject all that the philosophy of whole language represents and has accomplished. The core goals of the whole language movement are essential to the progress of our educational system and to the success of our children!

At this point in my fledgling career, my preservice perspective on resolving this debate centers around this analogy: For most beginning students of music, immersion in the classical genre by attending concerts and listening to recordings can do much to increase appreciation and inspiration, but it does not, in itself, provide enough knowledge of the basic skills necessary to achieve such a fine performance. While such immersion in the classics is an important element in the student's success, basic skills, repeated practice, and an opportunity to perform appropriate-level versions of familiar classic tunes are equally important in providing confidence and a desire to proceed. It would be ludicrous to deny the beginning student the benefits of attending a grand, classical concert. Equally senseless, would be to expect this beginning student with ***limited, basic skill development*** to perform at a level beyond capability. To do so, is inviting failure, frustration and all too often, disengagement.

The role of direct, decoding skills instruction in education must be allowed to resurface from its current subordinate position, to being one of

several key elements in teaching children to read. I truly believe that mastering these basic skills provides the learner with an additional strategy necessary to the success of automaticity and reading comprehension. Incorporating direct skills instruction into a whole language arts curriculum is a win-win situation for everyone - administrators, teachers, parents, and most importantly, the children!